Mental Ability (Negroes) 1921

INDIVIDUAL MERIT SHOULD TELL

Southwestern Christian advocate 7/21/21

This is obviously the psychological basis of the present situation of the American Negro. To the popular mind, the Negro appears as a class and the impressions made by the life of the poor Negro are generalized by the white man and are combined with dogmatic beliefs regarding the physical and hereditary mental make-up of the race. The consciousness that the Negro belongs to a class by himself is kept alive by the contrast presented by his physical appearance with that of the whites. For the descendants of the Teutonic peoples of Northern Europe, this consciousness has attained a high emotional value. It is natural that the stronger the individuality of a person who is thus assigned to a class with which he has little in common, the stronger must also be his resentment against those who refuse to take him at his individual worth. Every moment of his life, the self-respecting Negro feels the strain of his inability to overcome the prejudices that merge him in a type. This resentment will grow in extent as individual achievement develops among the Negroes while they are still not valued as individuals.

It is claimed by many that the Negro problem is economic rather than racial, that the fear of Negro competition causes racial opposition. Obviously, this explanation also would not hold good if the tendency did not exist to treat the Negro as a class, not as an individual. I do not wish to deny that the economic conflict may be a contributing cause that accentuates the pre-existing feeling of the contrast between whites and Negroes. This feeling may be emphasized in many ways —by cconomic interest, by questions of social privilege, or by any other social process that brings about conflicts of interest between large groups of whites and Negroes. It would however, be an error to seek in these sources the fundamental cause for the antagonism; for the economic conflict, as well as the other conflicts, presupposes the social recognition of the classes.

It is easier to point out the causes of conflict between whites and Negroes than to formulate a remedy. If my view is correct, it is clear that THE ONLY FUNDAMENTAL REMEDY FOR THE SITUATION IS THE RECOGNITION THAT THE NEGROES HAVE THE RIGHT TO BE TREATED AS INDIVIDUALS, NOT AS MEMBERS OF A CLAS.

"PROBLEM OF THE AMERICAN NEGRO,"

—Prof. Franz Boas.

DIVISION OF BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE RESEARCH REEL 13

SPECKS OF PROTOPLASM.

Dallas Tex. Express 12/16/23

A Psychologist of the University of Virginia, who is said to have made a careful study of the mentality of the black man in America, solemnly announces that "psychological study of the Negro indicates that he will never be the mental equal of the white race." That's a startling statement. If true, it would mean a tremendous amount of discouragement for ten millions of Negroes in these United States. For rightly or wrongly the leaders of the Negroes all over the world are trying to bring the black masses up to what is supposedly the high level of the white races.

To tell these leaders that the Negro can never reach that mental level is fairly good cause for discouragement. The people of this century are quite sure that mentality is the test of fitness to survive. They may be wrong. Proper emotions may be the real test, and eventually the nation that is highest emotionally will be the one that lives the longest; but at present mentality supposedly has the upper hand.

The cocksure Dr. George Oscar Ferguson of Virginia ought to remember, however, when he says that the Negro will never be the equal of the white man, that " never" is a long, long time. Before speaking too surely of the future it is always best to think rather searchingly of the past. Before saying that the Negro will never be any higher mentally, it is wise to remember that the white man was not always at his present high level. He is up now, but once he was down, much lower mentally than the people of Africa. Some millions of years ago, say the evolutionists, life was just a formless mess of protoplasm. In that mess was contained all of life the dog, the sheep, the lion, the louse, the flea, the cow, the elephant the chimpanzee, the bushman, the blackman, the pigmy, the German, the Italian, the Eskimo, the banker, the lawyer, the mechanic, the street sweeper, the bearded lady, and the human skeleton. Life twisted them and patte them an shaped them into various forms—all from this same strange and marvelous stuff. And for the bit that happens to be white to turn now to the bit that is black and say: "I am your superior, you can never be my equal, you can never think or feel or live as I do," is drawing the long bow and shooting a reckless arrow into the never-never land. That slithering one hears is the laughter of the protoplasm as it slips forever down the "ringing grooves of change." —San Fancisco, Cal.

DIVISION OF BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE RESEARCH REEL 13

Race Problem - 1921
United States.

SUPPOSED INFERIORITY OF DARKER RACES PROVED BASELESS

Dr. Frank Boas, Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University, Says That the White and Colored Races Do Not Differ Fundamentally, in New York Address.

Negro World Chicago 4/16/21

Reported by D. A. WADE.

At a meeting held at the People's Educational Forum, Lafayette Building, 165 West 131st street, on Sunday, April 3, 1921, Dr. Frank Boas lectured to an enthusiastic audience on the subject: "Supposed Inferiority of Darker Races."

Mr. Randolph Owen, editor of the "Messenger," a radical periodical, introduced Dr. Boas as a distinguished Anthropologist, an able educator, and a man whose expression of opinion on racial questions is valuable because of its impartiality.

In the course of the lecture Dr. Boas clearly showed that the white and colored races do not differ fundamentally; that the functions of the body are the same under like conditions—this includes the brain—and that in so far as structure and form are concerned, it is preposterous to identfy one race from another by the form of the lips, the shape of the face, and the physiological characteristics. This particular thought was illustrated when he spoke of how the people in different parts of the world do not conform entirely to the ideas given of them, and he gave as an example the difference of structure, based on his own experience, which he found among the Swedes and the Italians.

Dr. Frank Boas speaks:

"Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen: We are proud to think that we consider everything of a person whom we may meet according to his own merits. There are many aspects from which obviously our judgment is determined, which is rather by group than by denomination of individuals.

It is not only in the case of war, when whole nations are considered as one group and are looked at from the point of view as belonging to one particular group, not individually, but also in a peaceful life. Of course, in all those cases we are supposed to look at the value of the individual from the point of view of his group rather than of his own merits.

"Now, I want to speak today particularly on the question of 'race prejudice,' and how it may arise when our point of view is warped. One particular feature of 'race prejudice,' in any particular group is that we may consider every individual simply as a representative of a certain type. We take an example from Europe. When I speak about the Swedes, I may think of a person who is tall, blond, of blue eyes, with a long head; I may think of him as energetic, etc. As a matter of fact, when I went to Sweden, I did not find all the Swedes conform to this type, but that there were some of this type, and some of other types, so that not by any means all individuals conform to what I call a type. Just the same when I went to Sicily and studied the Italians in their province.

"I imagined the Sicilian rather temperamental, short, of nice dark hair and swarthy skin. But when I went there, I found that many of the individuals are blond, with red hair, blue eyes, etc., very energetic, some of them slow in their actions. Here again the idea which I have of a certain given type does not by any means conform with the actual conditions of the people. Now, what is true in these two cases is practically true of others.

We are always misled in thinking of a certain particular kind of type when we are speaking. We do not consider for a moment the fact that a group taken as a whole contains a great many different individuals of different types and different characteristics. Now, taking the question from this point of view it becomes clearly a scientific question. We ought not to ask ourselves what is the type of European, or what is the type of Negro, but we ought to ask ourselves what are all the different individuals like who compose a certain kind of people, and this question has been asked by anthropologists for a long time.

Of course, it is true that when we compare the different appearance of a European to that of a certain African Negro with regard to pigmentation, with regard to form, they are not alike. They are different people. When we study, on the other hand, certain features like the form of the lip, the shape of the stomach, and the type of the tongue, and the form of the brain, etc., we find something that is quite different. We find that all Europeans differ very, very much. If you try to identify the Europeans by the study of one of these organs, it would be utterly impossible, as the same kind of type is found among a great many different groups. Now, when we study in this way the Negroes and the whites, and this has been studied with a great deal of care and detail, we do find that in their relation, structure, in regard to their range of detailed power, it is quite impossible to say that he or she stand in a class as distinct from the Negroes. On the contrary, we do find that by far the majority of the two groups are exactly of the same forms, except in extreme cases.

Races Not Fundamentally Distinct.

And so it is with the organs of the body, setting aside pigmentation and different features, we may say in regard to the mass of organs that the different races of men are not, by any means, fundamentally distinct, and that the majority of individuals, though they belong to one group, may also belong to another group. I hope you understand what I mean by saying this. I do not mean to say that individuals of one race as the Chinese, or the white man and the Negroes are absolutely identical. But what I mean to say is that in so far as the structure of the different parts of the body, which is determined in the actual way of living, (I may call it the function of the body) is concerned, it is in all races alike.

We know that in the course of life we are all exposed to a great many different conditions of living, and we find that our organisms are perfectly able to cope with all conditions to which we are exposed. Let me illustrate: We say a certain child is born. If that child grows up in one country where one language is spoken, the tongue, the lips, will adjust themselves to the requirements of that particular kind of speech. If the child is taken into another country, then the same organs will adapt themselves to the different character of speech. As far as we know there is absolutely no form of the lips or tongue or mouth which will prevent anyone from doing just what is required in any particular kind of speech. In other words, the form does not actually determine the functions, but they can be adapted to the particular requirements of life whether in the white or Negro race. Of course there are a few cases, as in the case of an individual with a tied tongue to the lower jaw, who, when operated on and the tongue is cut cannot speak like the others, but in normal forms any kind of mouth, no matter what it may be, can function properly in the various circumstances.

Another matter which may be even more important and fundamental is the heart. Let us consider it for a moment. Our heart is supposed to maintain the circulation of the blood. Now the actual conditions under which our blood circulates are very different. Some may live at a certain altitude, and others may live 20,000 feet above the sea level, where they may have to work hard, and nevertheless the same heart will be practically capable of adjusting itself to the conditions of life. Here again we may say that the same form of heart may adjust itself in different conditions of life. We may also say that hearts do differ considerably in form, but they all do the same thing, and we may say the same in regard to the stomach and the intestines. The food in various places is very very different, and a great many of us have passed through periods of life where we adjusted ourselves to one kind of food or another. I take myself for example: When I was young I spent some time in the Arctic, where I had to adjust myself to a purely meat diet. At a later time I lived in the tropics, and was not completely adjusted to vegetable diets, and this is true of every one of us.

Now the same thing is true in regard to our nervous system and the brain. It is true that among Europeans there are different types of brain, some large and some small, some simple and some complicated, but we find that in the majority of cases they are all doing the same kind of work, and can be adjusted with the particular kind of requirements. In other words, we find that throughout the whole organism there is a wide margin of safety, whereby the various organs can adjust themselves. It depends simply upon the conditions of physical life, social life. But if we consider here what actually happens in the different families whom we know, notwithstanding the fact of this adjustability, there is a marked difference in the different families.

In one family, for instance, the members may be very strong physically. They may be called muscular, so that if the proper conditions are given we may say that such and such a family are composed very largely of individuals who are particularly adapted for physical work. And so it may be with another family where there is a tendency of weakness. It may be that the family tends to develop all sorts of diseases due to lack of resistance, and we may say that all the members of that family are subject to these influences.

So when we take the case of the brain development all of us know there are some families the members of which are great individuals, while on the other hand there are other families where the individuals are very stupid. The children inherit the stupidity of their parents. In other words, it is certainly true that not only the individuals in a certain given race are different, but we may also recognize that owing to the influence of heredity the whole family lines in a given race are different.

If we look at the race from this point of view we may recognize that in a family of one race there are certain lines of descent. There are certain families that are particularly strong, well adapted to cope with the work which is required of them, while there may be others who are in some way incapable. We ought to speak of hereditary characteristics of family lives, for when we study the family lives in different races we see that the sum of the lives concur in different races, and that there are weak families and strong families in the white race, there are weak families and strong families in the Asiatic race, and there are weak families and strong families in the African race.

Racial Heredity Does Not Exist.

Now white people speak of racial characteristics. The fundamental error which is made is whenever they speak of a race as all of the individuals of that race possessing the same characteristics, and that these characteristics were inherited from generation to generation. I want you to understand, as I said a while ago, that such an idea of racial heredity simply does not exist. We have here heredity in regard to family lives, and we have heredity in regard to certain individuals, but when we take the whole race with its enormous differences which exist in the various generations, we can only say that the next generation will possibly have some kind of distribution among different individuals in the different families. There is no sense in the statement that a certain characteristic is hereditary in a race and therefore belongs to every individual of that race. Anyone who makes that statement forgets that the different individuals, as well as the family lives in any given race, differ among themselves enormously, and really do not show any particular kind of simularity. The differences we found in one race are ever so much greater and fundamental than the differences which may be found in what we call different racial types. By racial types I mean the behavior of the people belonging to different races.

No Fundamental Difference Between White and Negro Race.

Now I should like to speak here about one point which I have discussed a great deal in recent times, and it is very often used in order to

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DIVISION OF BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE RESEARCH DEC 17

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substantiate the view that there is a fundamental difference between the white race and the Negro race which justifies racial prejudice. This observation was made in schools or the army by tests on Negroes and the white people of divers nationalities.

It is quite true that when these tests were made the results in regard to the ability of the different races were apparently quite different, and we found ordinarily that various white groups did much better than the Negro group did. But there was an observation equally important which must be taken into consideration. When a comparison was made between the tests on Negroes from Mississippi or Louisiana and those of the North, particularly Chicago, it was found that those from Chicago did better than the Negroes from Louisiana or Mississippi. Now we ask ourselves what is the reason for this peculiar fact. To my mind it is perfectly clear of what happened in a certain case. The Negroes who live in Chicago are accustomed to the particular kind of life about which these particular tests were devised, and, therefore he could act with a fair degree of certainty with what was demanded. The Negro from Mississippi did not have so much education, lived in a small community, and had no experience with the particular test.

Others who have made similar observations claim that this difference was due to the fact that the more energetic Negroes migrated from the South, and the weak remained. I do not believe that this explanation is at all tenable, but I can tell you also why I believe so. I would like to refer here to another kind of test which has also been made in the elementary schools here and in the colleges. There are a number of school children of the same ages; whites of the different nationalities and Negroes, and the following results were obtained: The best results were obtained from children of American parents. Very close to them were children of Jews; next to them were Negroes, and away behind were the Italians. Now, when we consider the actual inter-relationship between the races, the biological relationship between the different racial types, of course the Italians stand far away, but very close with the North Europeans, and it would be preposterous to assume that the Italians differ greatly from European groups; and we ask ourselves why was this difference actually found. When we investigate the home conditions we find that simply the social state was such that they were not so well adapted to the particular kind of test which was made. In other words, in all these cases when these tests were made it simply showed how a particular group adapted itself to that particular kind of test, but it does not show anything particularly in regard to general intelligence.

I can make this point clear by an example: There are a great many people whose system of relationship is quite different from ours. I use the term "my father, my mother," and I know exactly what I mean. And, therefore, if I ask anyone the question who is your father, he can answer at once automatically. But it is not so with the American Indians; we find in his native term father means not only the father but the mother. In such a case—the question has actually been asked by an investigator who is your father; and then the person ask, "whom do you need?" And the investigator says, "well, this person must be terribly stupid, but does not even know his own father. (Laughter). In this way we can readily see what is meant. In other words, my own impression is that the tests which we now-a-days use to prove that there is an essential difference between different races simply means that in the conditions given one people acts differently to another kind of people, and that does not mean anything in regard to their intelligence.

Now I think what we see here so far shows very clearly that when we look at the question of racial characteristics from a scientific point of view, when we study the behavior and the characteristics of different races, there is absolutely no reason for anyone to claim that one race differs fundamentally from another one; but we do say on the basis of what we know that all of them react in the same way, and the bulk of the people cannot respond to the utter requirements of life equally well. Of course there may be differences in extremes.

Why Race Prejudice Exists.

However, clearly we may recognize this fact, it does not do away with the actual occurrence of the actual existence of race prejudice, and I think it necessary to look at the matter from a different angle. We may all ask ourselves, "How did race prejudice originate? What does it mean? And why is it so difficult to overcome?" I think if we look at the matter from this point of view, we may go back to very early times. In the early times we had no very great masses of men. The people lived in small groups, separated from one another, each group inhabiting its own territory and keeping away from the other group.

Now, when we look at the way in which these people behaved in their time (even today they have not departed from that custom) we find that there is always hostility between one group and another group. We cannot know the reasons, but the particular group of people who live together, eat and drink together, this particular group of people set their own interests higher than the interests of anyone outside of their society. This has gone so far that in certain tribes we find that only those people who belong to that particular tribe are called human beings. For instance, when you study the names of the African tribes; one name, Bantu, means human being; and every one of another tribe is designated to be an enemy. In early times the feeling was that only members of one's own type were human beings and those outside not human beings, and should be treated accordingly. And we always have this particular kind of feeling when the society which is set aside from any other society reacts in any particular way, and only sets its own interest higher than the interest of mankind. So that it is intelligible, the whole idea of mutual application, when one type is helpful to another, which does away with this thing even in the most primitive shape. And we always have this particular kind of feeling when the society which is set from another society reacts in any particular way and only sets its own interest higher than the interest of mankind.

Of course, in American civilization, these conditions do not remain quite the same; they changed as times went on and the contact with different types became more intimate. This extreme point of view that every stranger is an enemy and ought to be killed gives way to a clearer concept of what mankind needs. Nevertheless, that particular kind of feeling that a particular race ought to preserve its existence and set the interest of the outsider lower than its own has prospered for a long time. You will therefore readily recognize, setting aside the question of race, that we have to overcome this point of view. Even at the present time our own laws are based on the supposition that the interests of the citizens of the States are higher than the interests of the rest of mankind; and it is not only in war that this idea is expressed, but, as for instance, in the case of protective tariff, which is of a national character, when we say we want to protect our own interests; the other interests do not concern us, so that obviously the same fundamental idea which prevailed in primitive times still exists at the present time, although it is less so.

This same thing exists in the lower animals. A group of buffaloes will not allow a strange buffalo to join them. A pack of wolves which goes hunting together will not allow an outside wolf to join them. You may have heard of the dogs in Constantinople, who control certain streets, and will not allow other dogs to enter their district. And if we look at the whole range of animals, the same thing is true. In other words, to my mind, we are dealing with a very fundamental instinct in man, which is very difficult to overcome intellectually, in so far as our instinct is always to set the interest of the group to which we belong higher than the interest of the whole community and mankind. We can see this now-a-days in society very clearly. We take another instance, a gang of boys; there may be another gang of boys in the same district, and there is no difference in their interest, but one gang will not allow the other gang to interfere with what they are doing; so it does not matter what type, whether it be white or colored, one family or another family, there is always this peculiar hereditary trait in those who belong to a group.

Breaking Up Class Distinctions.

We have, therefore, to recognize in every particular case that we are dealing with a question in which individuals do not recognize that all members of mankind have the same rights, and so they set their little group higher than the rest of mankind.

I think it is therefore clear that the whole question of class prejudice depends upon the question, "How far a certain group feel themselves as a unit higher than the rest of the population;" and so long as this feeling of unity remains against the rest of the population, we are bound to have class prejudice and class hostility. The only way therefore to overcome a prejudice of this kind is by breaking up class distinction. I think historically one of the best examples of this kind is the long struggles between the plebians and the patricians in Rome. These were two different groups which by descent were the same. Here is a case where for centuries a struggle existed between the two groups who felt themselves completely distinct; and the struggle did not end until the lines of demarkation were broken down.

Now, what do we mean by the breaking down of a social group? We mean this: that a man should be taken as an individual and not simply as a representative of a particular kind of group to which we may assign him; and the only problem then confronting us is to find means to do away with the feeling, so that class prejudice might be broken.

It is very characteristic that the degree of cohesion actually determines the degrees of prejudice and the degree of antagonism that we do find. We take another example to illustrate the same point. When we consider the condition in Europe, we find there is particularly a feeling against the Jew. It is, of course, also of the same character as any other kind of race or class prejudice. And here also the question is simply the question of the gradual breaking down of the class consciousness and the development of a feeling that each individual is to be taken by his individual value, and only in this way can we hope to actually overcome the conflicts.

I think there is one very general observation that may be followed when we look at the matter from this point of view and I wish you would see that it is not only a question of consciousness of race in any particular case, as in the whites against the Negroes, but it is the same with the Negroes against the whites. In other words, the phenomena which is repeated here is found in Europe in regard to the Jews and Gentiles. As long as the Jews formed a unit and did not allow themselves to mix with the other class from a social point of view—individual friendships and contact outside of their group were not permissible—a strong class feeling persisted; but when gradually the group feeling was broken down, when an effort was made to establish personal friendship and relations, the old established class lines were gradually overcome, the antagonism was overcome, which had previously existed for many centuries. And the same thing is true in every single case, whether class or race, that race prejudice can be overcome only by individual effort (and not be a joining together of a large group) to bridge the gaps wherever it may be possible. (Applause).

N Y C WORLD
JUNE 9, 1921

The South and the Negro.

To the Editor of The World:

A few words to R. T. Johnson of Media, Pa. The trouble with him is he lived too long in the South. He speaks of negroes being given food, clothes, &c., not knowing that the negro of to-day wants no gifts of charity but a fair chance to earn an honest dollar. He speaks of some scalawag whisper "Go get your rights." Has he not fought for those rights? Fough also for Mr. R. T. Johnson and his ilk. Did any scalawag whisper to the negroes on Williams's farm in Georgia?

Maybe he thinks the negro only a catspaw to pull others' chestnuts from the fire. The thing for Mr. Johnson to do is to get away from his own little world and study a few facts.

New York, June 7. A NEGRO.

DIVISION OF BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE RESEARCH REEL 17